

Book Review – Jihad Totalitarianism, International Security and the West in Joschka Fischer’s Die Rückkehr der Geschichte

*By Charles Dobson**

[Joschka Fischer, *Die Rückkehr der Geschichte / Die Welt nach dem 11. September und die Erneuerung des Westens*, Verlag Kiepenheuer & Witsch: Köln (2005), ISBN: 3-462-03035-03, pp. 253, EUR 9.95]

In the aftermath of September 11th 2001, there has been no shortage of written reflections on the relationship of the events of that day to the past and their significance for the future. While most these works are the products of academics, journalists, and other professional writers, *Die Rückkehr der Geschichte* (*The Return of History*) stands out in that Joschka Fischer wrote and published it while serving as Germany’s Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs. Focusing primarily on challenges to international security, Fischer treats this issue from a variety of angles. Foremost amongst these is the threat of Islamic terrorism, the role of the United States of America, and the significance of the principles behind the European Union. This book is a noteworthy read. It provides an excellent opportunity to engage with the thoughts of a politician who has played an important role in the global effort to grapple with the considerable security challenges currently facing the international community.

At 253 pages, *Die Rückkehr der Geschichte* is a relatively short book, and is organized into seven chapters. One might expect a work written by a politician on international affairs to contain references to his or her professional experiences in this area, but Fischer does not speak of his own experiences on the job. The book reads almost like a collection of impersonal essays, with each chapter dealing with a topic under the umbrella issue of international security, and arguments are supported with footnotes rather than anecdotes. The discussion opens in the first chapter with an explanation of the significance of the terrorist attacks on September 11th, 2001. In the second chapter, Fischer describes the state of the international

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political order and surveys the regions of the globe, pointing out regional and international security threats. In the third, fourth, and fifth chapters, he discusses Europe and America, both in their own rights and in their relationship to one another. Chapter six is devoted to the Middle East, which Fischer regards as a particularly serious source of disquiet. Finally, in the seventh chapter, Fischer elaborates on his vision for a new international political order, which includes a significant reformation of the United Nations.

The primary challenge to international security, writes Fischer, is Islamic terrorism.¹ In his view, the main purpose of the September 11th attacks was to provoke the America into reacting in a blind rage.² This, so the strategy went, would lead to chaos in the Middle East, and provide an opportunity for true-believing Muslims to overthrow the corrupt nationalist regimes and replace them with the Caliphate, an Islamic theocracy. For these terrorists, Afghanistan under the Taliban is the model for their vision of the Caliphate.³ According to Fischer, the form of Islam behind this vision is another instance of totalitarianism, in line with Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany.⁴ This, Fischer contends, is evidenced by the way adherents of “*jihad* terrorism”⁵ regard even the most inhuman and barbaric acts committed in the name of their ideology as justified and glorious.⁶ Further, these terrorists seek a state wherein deviation from sanctioned beliefs and behaviour would be brutally suppressed.⁷ Lest one unjustly suspect Fischer of warmongering, it is essential to note that he does not argue that Western societies are at risk of becoming overrun and replaced with a totalitarian regime. Rather, it is Islamic societies that face this threat. Fischer also stresses that there are at least two significant differences between this new instance of totalitarianism and the two exemplars from the 20th century. First, “*jihad* totalitarianism”⁸ is the “most radical answer to the crisis of modernity in the world of Islam,”⁹ and therefore does not stem from the “nightmares of the European Enlightenment and the crises of modernity in the

¹ JOSCHKA FISCHER, *DIE RÜCKKEHR DER GESCHICHTE* (2005), 249.

² *Id.*, 17.

³ *Id.*, 18.

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.*, 18.

⁷ *Id.*, 19.

⁸ *Id.*, 20.

⁹ *Id.*, 20.

West”¹⁰. Second, whereas Hitler and Stalin ruled over industrial states with enormous military potential, Osama bin Laden heads an international terrorist network.¹¹ Thus warfare between the West and Islamic terrorists is asymmetrical rather than symmetrical. Since this will not unseat America as the sole superpower, the main issue for the West is how high the general political, economic, and cultural costs of the fight against terrorism will be, and whether the American and European public can stomach them over the long-term.¹² The extent of these costs turns, in large part, on how deep and strong *jihad* totalitarianism is rooted in the Islamic world and whether the West and the Islamic societies can successfully isolate and eliminate it.

Although Fischer insists that eliminating *jihad* totalitarianism will “above all” be a matter for Islamic societies,¹³ he also maintains that the success of this venture will depend on the strategy of the West.¹⁴ Fischer does not explain the relationship between these claims, but appears to suggest that a combination of action on the parts of both actors is essential. Unfortunately, he does not specifically address what will be required of Islamic societies, but he does insist that the West must employ a strategy that is far-sighted and clear.¹⁵ He further advises that the decisive question will not only be whether *jihad* totalitarianism can be suppressed with police and military action, but also whether its cultural and societal roots can be displaced with positive alternatives.¹⁶ Beyond warning that answering this question will be a highly complex and time-consuming political challenge, Fischer provides no further explicit direction on this point. However, later in the book, he does suggest that the Arabic world must undergo a process of modernization in line with the principles of liberalism.¹⁷

Since it is the only superpower on the global political stage and was the target of the September 11th attacks, Fischer discusses America at length. His central concern is the way the United States will choose to understand its role in the international

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.*, 20.

¹² *Id.*, 22.

¹³ *Id.*, 22.

¹⁴ *Id.*, 23.

¹⁵ *Id.*, 23.

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ *Id.*, 230.

political order at this early stage in the 21st century. In his view, America faces the choice of defining itself as being within or outside of the international political system.¹⁸ Consequently, the world faces the possibility of being divided once again, as it was during the Cold War. If such a division were to occur, there would be the “new world”, i.e. the United States of America, on the one hand and, on the other, the “old world of the UN.”¹⁹ Whether this situation will actually arise depends, to a significant degree, on the direction of America’s foreign policy. This, in turn, hinges on the question of whether the attacks of September 11th have altered the character of the United States, its democracy, its self-definition, and its view of the world in a lasting sense.²⁰ For Fischer, what is now known as the “West” is at stake in the outcome of this question.²¹ While he does not venture to answer it himself, Fischer, perhaps unsurprisingly, insists that international security in the 21st century must, above all, be built on co-operation and consensus.²² The security challenges of this century, which, in addition to Islamic terrorism, include weapons of mass destruction, epidemics, failed states, refugee crises, and genocide, require that less emphasis be placed both on achieving security through military means and on an understanding of sovereignty that is fixated on the state.²³ Since America, as the sole superpower, will be essential to achieving such an international order, in Fischer’s view it must be a part of the international political system.

Fischer’s emphasis on co-operation and consensus in the international political order stems from the way he regards these principles as successfully operating as part of the basis of the European Union. In the wake of WWII and under the Soviet threat, for their security the states of Western Europe had to overcome their national rivalries, relinquish their sovereignty to a degree, and integrate themselves through new, shared social institutions.²⁴ Through this process, a political order wherein freedom, tolerance, democracy, the rule of law, and the market economy could flourish was created. Consequently, Europe successfully confronted the challenges of nationalism and totalitarianism that it faced in the 20th century. Now, Fischer contends, the same principles that safeguarded European security in the

¹⁸ *Id.*, 118.

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ *Id.*, 123.

²¹ *Id.*, 124.

²² *Id.*, 147.

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ *Id.*, 101.

20th century can be applied to safeguard global security in the 21st century.²⁵ Thus to confront successfully the challenge to international security that Islamic terrorism presents, an international political order that operates on the principles of co-operation and consensus is necessary.²⁶

Die Rückkehr der Geschichte provides an excellent opportunity to share in the thoughts of an experienced and skilful statesman. Fischer gives the impression that the challenges confronting international security are significant, but not insurmountable. Indeed, his discussion of the European Union suggests that the global community already has an important source for inspiration. Although the discussion is, on the whole, very readable and engaging, ideally Fischer could have stated the objectives of some of his arguments more clearly. For example, the argument outlined in the previous paragraph is contained in the third chapter of *Die Rückkehr der Geschichte*. The idea that global security can be achieved through an approach drawing on the principles behind European integration is the ultimate, and the most significant, point Fischer makes in this chapter. However, the beginning of the chapter does not contain a thesis statement, or an outline of his argument, or any other sort of explicit guidance regarding the point Fischer intends to make. While readers familiar with Fischer's ideas, and particularly his speech in honour of his receipt of the "German-British 2000 Award,"²⁷ will likely know what Fischer intends to accomplish in this chapter, newcomers to his ideas may not. For a book that is aimed at the general public and not just specialist readers, rigorously clearly stated arguments would probably not go amiss. Further, some of Fischer's most significant arguments, or portions thereof, could have benefited from more development. For example, this applies to his argument that the Europe's approach to its security in the latter half of the 20th century can be applied to achieve global security in the 21st century. Whereas Fischer devotes approximately forty-one pages to describing the historical development behind European integration and its success at protecting European security, the manner in which this approach could serve as a model for achieving global security in the struggle against terrorism is treated in two mere paragraphs. This is unfortunate, as these paragraphs raise many exciting questions, but do not provide much guidance with which to begin answering them. The preceding comments are only quibbles, however, and hardly detract from a book that is a noteworthy and engaging read.

²⁵ *Id.*, 114.

²⁶ *Id.*, 115.

²⁷ Available at: <http://www.germany.info/relaunch/politics/speeches/012401.html>, last accessed: 13 March 2007.

Though there are significant challenges to international security to be faced in the 21st century, Fischer is optimistic that they can be dealt with successfully. In *Die Rückkehr der Geschichte*, he describes these challenges and his recommendations for confronting them. If a critical mass of world leaders share his views, then the case for having confidence in the future of the international political order will be greatly strengthened.